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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some educational developments which have either surfaced or been revived during the past decade or so and which may contribute to or influence the teaching of reading. The developments discussed include: accountability and performance contracting; the use of more adults (parents, paraprofessionals, and college students) in the classroom; television--the influence of which is still undetermined; new motivation techniques; a recognition of individual differences; British infant schools and informal education; an increased awareness of the relationship of language development to reading; an acceptance of nonstandard English; and linguistics. The author indicates that none of these educational developments have changed the teaching of reading appreciably and that the factor which can most influence reading is an improved awareness of language and its relationship to reading. (WR)

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READING: THE PAST REVISITED

The assumption of the title of this session: "New Approaches to Teaching Reading" is that there are new approaches to reading instruction. If, indeed, there are such new approaches, what are they, what do they include, and how do they differ from traditional approaches? Publishers advertise a reading series as a new means of teaching reading, yet one rarely finds that much of the content is new. Occasionally an article heralds a new method of teaching reading, a set of physical exercises promising to prevent or cure all reading problems, or a new discovery concerning the reading process, but, more often than not, it is simply old wine in new bottles.

Whether or not there are new approaches to teaching reading may be a debatable issue, though I tend to think that there are very few, if any. However, there are some educational developments which either have surfaced or have been revived during the past decade or so, and which may contribute to or influence the teaching of reading. Some of these developments are external, that is, they deal with the structure of the school and/or classroom and may have an effect on the teaching act; others deal with substantive issues.

Two terms which have loomed, frighteningly to some, on the educational horizon recently are performance contracting and accountability. Frequently, both involve the teaching of reading. Most reports of

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instructional practices under a performance contract do not appear to indicate that new techniques are used to teach reading; the major difference seems to be that a greater portion of the school day is devoted to reading instruction. Many teachers have always considered themselves accountable for teaching children to read without extrinsic rewards, so, while the concept of accountability may not be new for some teachers, to others it may loom both new and threatening. As with performance contracting, however, the accountability emphasis does not necessarily imply that new approaches are used to teach reading. It may mean, rather, that more time is spent in teaching reading, or it may even mean that time is spent in teaching to a test. Technically, all educational sectors should be accountable--the universities and colleges who prepare teachers, the state departments who certify them, and the several levels of personnel in school systems who are engaged in various types of instructional activities.

A relatively new development, which in some cases, has resulted in change in the classroom structure is the use of more adults in the classroom. A school may provide auxiliary professional personnel, such as helping teachers, or parents and other paraprofessionals may be assigned to a classroom. Increasing the ratio of adults to children enables a teacher to spend more time with individual children; this probably is or can be a prime factor in changing a teacher's approach to reading instruction. Hopefully, freeing a teacher from busy work gives her time to concentrate on the individual differences of children.

Perhaps the newest technique, the influence of which is still undetermined, is television, specifically Sesame Street. The program had a great impact on young children during its first year, and it may have long range influences as yet unmeasured or even unknown. It is too soon to draw even tentative conclusions about the Electric Company, the television program designed to teach seven to ten year old children to read, but the techniques and approaches used in the program undoubtedly will have a considerable impact upon children throughout the country. Certainly the skillful use of the medium of television will have some effect on the teaching of reading; hopefully, one of these effects will be that of motivating children to read.

Reports of research rarely mention studies concerned with motivation--reading as an activity to produce enjoyment or as a means to an end--either of learning to read or of reading to learn. There is little consideration given to establishing reasons for learning to read. What is the motivation for a child to learn to read? Some rationale must be advanced to the child as to why he should learn to read, and it must be stated in terms acceptable and reasonable to him. In Nila Banton Smith's summary of trends and implications of research in reading, no research focusing on motivation is reported.[5] Any approach to teaching reading must make learning to read a significant activity for all children; if the child is not motivated to read, he will not read.

The wave of interest in perceptual and motor activities and programs

has aroused both discussion and dissension as proponents and opponents debate their value. Some adherents claim great gains, particularly for children with learning disabilities as a result of perceptual and motor training. Balow, reviewing the literature in the area, found no research that demonstrated special effectiveness for any of the physical, motor, or perceptual programs claiming to be useful in the prevention or correction of reading or other learning disabilities. Balow suggests, however, that such programs be considered non-specific additions to the curriculum which may help teach children important general behavioral skills necessary for success in school rather than replacements for the direct teaching of basic school skills.[1]

The concept of individual differences has been recognized for many years, and teachers have been encouraged, even admonished, to take each child at his own stage of development and help him to grow. Individualization of instruction should mean that a child is given the opportunity to realize his potential. This, however, is the ideal, not the real world. Individualizing reading instruction should result in universal literacy for the segment of the population enrolled in schools. An examination of the literacy statistics, however, reveals that this goal has not been achieved--the schools are not turning out people who read. Rather, we have a significant segment of school dropouts, the majority of whom have reading problems. Apparently individual differences still are not recognized to the extent that we have capitalized on them in teaching children to read. No scheme has yet been devised for teaching children to read which

takes into account their individual characteristics, builds on their strengths, and compensates for their weaknesses although almost every textbook on the teaching of reading stresses the importance of this procedure.

The interest in the British infant schools and informal education has increased since the publication of the Plowden Report in 1967. Articles in professional journals appear frequently in this country describing various aspects of the open classroom or integrated day. Weber defines informal education by saying that it ". . . refers to the setting, the arrangements, the teacher-child and child-child relationships that maintain, restimulate if necessary, and extend what is considered to be the most intense form of learning, the already existing child's way of learning through play and through the experiences he seeks out for himself."[7] The emphasis on allowing children to learn at their own pace and the stress on children's use of oral language have captured the interest of many educators in the United States. At its best informal education has much to commend it--the interest centers, the freedom of movement which is particularly essential for small boys, and the emphasis on children's talking and writing. On a theoretical basis, and if it is properly handled, the integrated day should allow for individualization of instruction.

One of the most significant developments affecting the teaching of reading is the current emphasis on language and its relationship to reading. Lenneberg listed six characteristics of language:

1. It is a form of behavior present in all cultures of the world.

2. In all cultures its onset is age correlated.

3. There is only one acquisition strategy--it is the same for all babies everywhere in the world.

4. It is based instrinsically upon the same formal operating characteristics whatever its outward form.

5. Throughout man's recorded history these operating characteristics have been constant.

6. It is a form of behavior that may be impaired specifically by circumscribed brain lesions which may leave other mental and motor skills relatively unaffected.[4]

Lenneberg's list indicates that language is universal, that the single language acquisition strategy is related to age, and that throughout the ages the operating characteristics of language have been constant. The list reinforces the consensus among linguists concerning language acquisition--by the time a child enters school at six or seven, he possesses a fairly sophisticated language system, or as Venezky says, "he has mastered a system of signals for communicating in a meaningful fashion with other people."[6] The task at that stage--school entry--is to teach children to read, to make the transition from spoken language to written language.

The language deficit theory has been discarded by linguists and psycholinguists as well as by many people in reading. However, it must be recognized that the child who speaks a dialect different from the dialect used in the materials or of the teacher may have problems in learning to read which are different from those of the child who speaks the dialect of the classroom. Goodman hypothesizes that the

difficulty of learning to read depends upon the degree of divergence between the dialect of the learner and the dialect of learning.[2]

The language the child brings to school is a part of the culture of his community; he reacts and responds to situations primarily through the medium of his language. If the teacher rejects his linguistic response by inferring that his means of expression is incorrect, he feels that his cultural milieu has been rejected, and repeated remonstrances by the teacher will result in a decline of his exuberance and diminishing of his self-confidence. The child soon learns that school is not the place for him to express himself.

Several solutions have been suggested for teaching speakers of divergent dialects to read. Goodman says that divergent speakers have a tendency, surprising to him, to read in book dialect, so that in their oral reading they use phonemes different from those which they use in oral language. He suggests three alternatives for school programs. First, materials may be based on their own dialect, or standard materials such as basal readers may be rewritten in the dialect; second, children may be taught to speak the standard dialect before they are taught to read. Third, the children may read the standard materials in their own dialect, or in other words, the teacher accepts the language of the learner as the medium of learning. Goodman considers the third alternative the only practical solution and cites several key aspects of the approach.

1. Literacy is build on the base of the child's existing language.

2. Children must be helped to develop a pride in their language and confidence in their ability to use their language to communicate their ideas and express themselves.

3. The focus in reading instruction must be on learning to read. No attempt to change the child's language must be permitted to enter into this process or interfere with it.

4. Special materials need not be constructed, but children must be permitted, even encouraged, to read the way they speak.

5. Any skill instruction must be based on a careful analysis of their language.

6. Reading materials and reading instruction should draw as much as possible on experiences and settings appropriate to the children.

7. The teacher will speak in his own natural manner and present by example the general language community, but the teacher must learn to understand and accept the children's language. He must study it carefully and become aware of the key elements of divergence that are likely to cause difficulty. [2]

Labov suggests that teachers who work with black speakers of non-standard English may not have a systematic knowledge of the nonstandard forms which oppose and contradict standard English and may even be reluctant to believe that there are systematic principles in nonstandard English which differ from those of standard English. Of the phonological and grammatical differences between nonstandard Negro speech and standard English, the most important are those in which large scale phonological differences coincide with important grammatical differences.

The result of this coincidence, according to Labov, is the existence of a large number of homonyms in the speech of black children which are different from the set of homonyms in the speech system used by

the teacher. Knowledge of this different set of homonyms on the part of the teacher should preclude problems in teaching reading to speakers of nonstandard English. This information may be organized under the headings of the important rules of the sound system which are affected. By using lists of homonyms as examples it will be possible to avoid a great deal of phonetic notation and to stay with the essential linguistic facts. Whether a child says pen or pin is unimportant; the linguistic fact of interest is the existence of contrast.

Labov says that a linguistic orientation will not supply teachers with a battery of phonetic symbols, but rather, it will encourage them to observe what words can or cannot be distinguished by the children they are teaching. In teaching a child to read who has general phonological grammatical characteristics of the nonstandard speaker, the most immediate way of analyzing difficulties is through the interpretation of his oral reading. There are many phonological rules which affect his pronunciation, but not necessarily his understanding of the grammatical signals or his grasp of the underlying lexical forms. The relationships between grammar and pronunciation are complex and require careful interpretation.

Labov lists three basic principles which may be helpful in teaching reading:

1. In analyzing and correcting oral reading, teachers must distinguish between differences in pronunciation and oral reading.
2. In the early stages of teaching reading and spelling it may be necessary to spend much more time on the grammatical function of certain inflections which may have no function in the dialect of some of the children.

3. A certain amount of attention given to perception training in the early school years may be very helpful in teaching children to hear and make standard English distinctions; such training, however, need not be completed before teaching children to read.

As Labov says, ". . there is no reason why a person cannot learn to read standard English texts quite well in a nonstandard pronunciation." Although the school may ultimately wish to teach the child an alternative system of English pronunciation, the key to the situation in the early grades is for the teacher to know the system of homonyms of nonstandard English and to know the grammatical differences that separate her speech from that of the child.[3]

Goodman and Labov agree that children who are not speakers of standard English need not experience failure in learning to read, but that the crucial factor is the teacher's acceptance of the child's language, and the teacher's knowledge that there are different language systems. Their suggestions could and should be incorporated into any approach to teaching reading. This is probably the most important factor in reading instruction--it is not an approach to teaching reading, but a constant in reading instruction regardless of the approach that is used.

Venezky, et. a., note that one hears of "psycholinguistic approaches to reading; they comment that sufficient knowledge exists concerning natural language theory and cognitive psychology that needed improvements in reading instruction might be realized. They conclude that until the correspondences between these facts and the acquisition of reading ability are established empirically, a psycholinguistic program of

reading instruction will remain an unrealized challenge. Venezky's contention is that certain component skills must be examined if the teaching of reading is to be significantly improved. These skills include task skills, the ability to follow directions and carry out various tasks, oral language skills, and skills related to acquisition of letter-sound relationship.[7]

If the teacher is to experience success in teaching children to read, she must accept the child's language or dialect, and if he speaks a dialect other than that of the classroom, know about the differences which distinguish her language from his. Then the teacher has before her the the task of teaching the child to read, and the skills cited by Venezky will have to be incorporated into her repertoire.

What is new in teaching reading? No dramatic scheme which will guarantee instant success for each child exposed to reading instruction has appeared, and such a scheme probably will not appear until we know much more than we now do about the reading process itself. However, we probably know enough, that given properly prepared teachers who like and understand children, we should turn out few children who fail to learn to read.

None of the educational developments mentioned here have changed the teaching of reading to any appreciable extent. The factor which can influence reading instruction, and which perhaps can have a lasting effect on the children we are trying to teach is that of an improved awareness of language and its relationship to reading.

A teacher who has an understanding of language and its structure, and who possesses the requisite skills to understand and to capitalize on a child's particular strengths should be able to provide the proper opportunity for children to learn to read.

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